

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF AMERICAN ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTION

Out of approximately 337 million of users of English residing on three continents,¹ 260 million who live in the United States of America display certain common linguistic and cultural characteristics. However, it is also true that approximately 56 million of British people² who use English, live in a non-American environment. Taking into consideration also complementary aspects such as politics, economy or social and political structures, one may expect distinct differences between British and American One may, however, ask whether there exists such thing as new American language and whether obvious differences typical for English spoken in the United States are sufficient to justify its appearance. From the linguistic point of view, the degree of vernacular features ascribed to that language caused diverse opinions, reflected by titles of books on the subject which today remain just of historical significance. Shortly after the end of WW I, co-editor of *Smart Set* H. L. Mencken put on his linguistic hat and issued a book *The American Language* (1919).³ Six years later, Professor George Philip Krapp of Columbia University issued a two-volume work on the same subject: *The English Language in America*.

The difference between these titles reflects two different approaches on the subject. Mencken⁴ focused on the spoken language, which allowed him to conclude that American and British English are separate languages, and he ventured to expect a rising trend in this respect. On the other hand, Krapp⁵ guided by his analysis of written language (formal and literary), presented an opposite view opining that American English should remain close to the linguistic traditions of the Great Britain. Generally, linguists agree with Krapp, even if they are ready to use data collected by Mencken.⁶ Even if one dismisses the title of Mencken's work as overly provocative, one has to

¹ Data quoted here are estimates and account only for users for whom English is their first language and who make up the so-called *inner circle of English* which embraces the U.S.A., Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Other sources, such as e.g. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (1992) or *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook* (1996) give much higher numbers of English language users, amounting to 450 million.

² D. Crystal, *English as a global language*, Cambridge 1997.

³ H.L. Mencken, *The American Language*, New York 1919.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ G.Ph. Krapp, *The English Language in America*, 2 vols, New York 1925.

⁶ Thomas Pyles may serve as an example here, as he quoted a lot of data from Mencken in his work *Words and Ways in American English* (1954) but he did not agree with Mencken on the linguistic status of American English.

admit that Krapp's title fails to reflect special character of American English. The most precise term to describe the variety of English used in the United States seems to be *American English* where the word *English* negates any implication of a separate language while the adjective *American* suggests something more than just a plain transplant of the language used in the Great Britain. The discussed phrase fully reflects the novel character of American English as a vernacular organism, inseparably intertwined with the reality of the new homeland.

EXTRALINGUISTIC FACTORS SHAPING THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF AMERICAN VARIETY OF ENGLISH

External factors to be considered as shaping special features of American English include linguistic influences of West African slaves brought to the New World as cheap workforce, languages of Native Americans used in contacts with English-speaking newcomers and also influences of languages spoken by members of various immigrant waves from Europe.

The colonies were gradually expanding, but they refrained from spreading onto the West which remained "Wild" until the end of the 19th century. At that time, the number of immigrants from Germany and South Ireland grew rapidly, including Scots settled in Ireland. As more convenient settlements proved to be already occupied by English people, plenty of these immigrants headed towards the South-West. Scottish-Irish migration wave moving inland was a key factor influencing the transfer of English spoken in Central States towards the new Western territories, which shaped the foundations for the American standard described as *General American*.⁷ The territorial expansion was accompanied by economic development of the country and gradually there appeared first symptoms of the conflict with the British Empire, which finally resulted in the outbreak of the War of Independence. Native Americans were persecuted and exterminated in order to ensure more land and freedom for white settlers.⁸

At that time, English underwent rapid development with respect to vocabulary which was enriched by various borrowings and association of new meanings with existing lexemes. Most of the borrowings were necessary,⁹ including *exotics*,¹⁰ that is words related to the culture of the country whose language serves as the source for the borrowing, as well as names of designates and concepts unknown in the recipient language. This is related to new social, cultural and geographical context to which English had to adjust while being spoken on a new continent.

⁷ A.C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed., New York 1957.

⁸ F. Ionescu, *Dicționar de Americanisme*, București 1998.

⁹ Necessary and redundant borrowings are discussed, among other things by Derooy (1956: 137, 161) and Haugen (1950). Hope (1963) presents different approach, negating the expediency of such division, as any reason for a borrowing may be considered sufficient.

¹⁰ This term is used by various linguists. See for example Stene 1945: 14, Fisiak 1961: 108, Morawski 1992: 80.

Social factors

The influence of numerous local factors, development of new community structures, new concepts in art and technology and also everyday, common contacts with Native American tribes unknown in Europe required an introduction of new terms which had to be defined in a way to make them generally comprehensible. The above factors accounted for the difference of the variety of English spoken in the United States.

The outbreak of the War of Independence (1775–1783) which ended with the victory of thirteen American colonies and the recognition of the independence of the United States of North America by Great Britain commenced an era of isolation, often marked with chauvinist accents in relations between the Americans and English. Extreme solutions are proposed also in the area of language, including total departure from English language and culture. John Adams proposed the establishment of National Academy to supervise and monitor the development of English in the United States of North America, independently from a similar British institution. However, his concept was rejected as non-compliant with the spirit of liberty and tolerance cultivated by the newly established democratic state. In some marginal instances during the colonial period it was suggested to introduce one of the classical languages (Latin, Greek or Hebrew) as a common language in America. Advocates of this solution argued that the above languages used by educated elites are universal enough to be approved by all language minorities in America. Which was more important, they considered it as a gesture which would manifest at least linguistic independence from Great Britain. Debaters of that time suggested also other modern languages while discussing the official language in the United States. British etymologist Sir Herbert Croft reported in 1797 that during the Revolution Americans proposed to introduce French, "revenging themselves on England by rejecting its language and adopting that of France."¹¹ Outstanding figures such as Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) or, later, Noah Webster (1753–1783) were of a similar opinion. Franklin perceived Germans as a major challenge to *a perfect Union*, as he saw them striving to dominate Pennsylvania. Perfectly organised German community was engaged in vigorous political, business and cultural activities. Germans printed their own newspapers, imported German language textbooks, established societies for promoting their mother tongue and culture; they also introduced German names of streets and towns/villages.

Linguistic diversity of national minorities was frequently used as a tool in political struggles and a pretext to strip these minorities off their political influence. In such instances, it was held that common language should ensure unity of American nation in such areas as morality, patriotism and logical, commonly used manner of thinking. Those cultivating their own national traditions were approached suspiciously and hardly ever trusted.

Noah Webster supported another strategy. In all his works, he intended to present the distinct character of English used in America, its development conditioned by specific factors and the need to develop an independent American approach to the

¹¹ B.S. Heath, *Bilingual education in the United States* [in:] *Language in the USA*, Ferguson (ed.), Cambridge 1981, p. 9.

language spoken in that country. Webster considered also the social and political significance of language. In his introduction to *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1883) he said:

The author wishes to promote the honour and prosperity of the confederated republics of America; and cheerfully throws his mite into the common treasure of patriotic exertions. This country must in some future time, be as distinguished by the superiority of her literary improvements, as she is already by the liberality of her civil and ecclesiastical constitutions. Europe is grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny (...). For America in her infancy to adopt the present maxims of the old world, would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepitude upon the bloom of youth and to plant the seeds of decay in vigorous constitution.¹²

Six years later, in his *Dissertations on the English Language, with Notes Historical and Critical* he ventured even further on in his resolute approach:

As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as government. Great Britain, whose children we are, should no longer be our standard; for the taste of her writers is already corrupted, and her language on the decline. But if it were not so, she is at too great distance to be our model, and instruct us in the principle of our own tongue.¹³

American public schools were another ally in the struggle for new American identity, guaranteeing that all citizens should receive "English" education understood as a study of English grammar and spelling, as well as reading and composition. It promoted a vision of American standard of English which should be learnt by all who see themselves as conscious citizens. However, it proved extremely difficult to introduce a sole language in schools and a uniform curriculum acceptable for all members of the society characterised by such ethnic, religious and economic diversity. The problems were aggravated by the fact that not all Americans were aware of how important it is to educate their children. In the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, special procedures were introduced for enrolment in schools, due to the lack of interest. At that time, a decision was made to guarantee to ethnic minorities school instruction in their national languages. However, in the 1890s, public schools in Cleveland, San Francisco and Ohio had so many students that they began to withdraw from privileges for national minorities. One of the greater successes of the young state was relieving families from the responsibility to educate the children and placing it on the state, by imposing mandatory school taxes. It was also a milestone in the process of establishing English as a dominant language in the United States.

Political and Economic Factors

Immigrants chose English as the first language for social, religious, economic and political reasons. Mushrooming American industry needed more and more qualified workers who received bonuses for their knowledge of English. Employers favoured English-speaking workers who were able to better understand instructions and orders, did not pose any threat to safety in factories and changed work much less frequently. Economic reasons as well as the sense of economic security and ap-

¹² A.C. Baugh, op.cit., p. 426.

¹³ Ibidem.

proval by the majority were decisive factors for the natural choice of that language against any others.

The issue of linguistic diversity posing a challenge to the unity of state and resulting in political and national separations was raised again at the beginning of the 20th century. However, that time the discussion did not focus on American-British relations but centred on the possible internal divisions in the United States. Many political discussions on language and nation emphasised that it is necessary to embark on a conscious language policy promoting the concept of one state language and restricting influence of other national languages:

A cleavage in the language now would mean to us a cleavage of the nation in its most vulnerable if not in its most essential part. That, no matter what our origin, no real American can desire; for it is not a question whether we are to be part German or part English. We might survive with the national spirit cut in two; but should our German born citizens be successful in making German co-equal with English in our public schools, the Bohemians, who hate the very sound of the German language, will demand a similar chance for the Czesch [sic] tongue, and they know how to fight for what they want.¹⁴

In the 1960s the debates on the linguistic division of the country became even more frequent and fervent. Solutions proposed at that time were as extreme as two hundred years earlier. Those negative emotions were triggered by the introduction of *Bilingual Education Act* which guaranteed bilingual education to children with national language other than English. Opponents against the Act argued that it would lead the United States towards political, economic and cultural division.

However, when the sense of unity and independence of the United States strengthened, the attitude has changed dramatically. English ceased to be perceived as a challenge to national identity of the American people.

Discussing the linguistic environment in the United States from historic perspective, it seems worthwhile to emphasise two features: its comprehensive character and privileged status of English which was achieved not by political coercion but mostly through social and economic factors. These factors contributed to the occurrence of particular, concrete educational and social mechanisms promoting knowledge of English. On one hand, national leaders have never made any significant attempt to develop state language policy which would account for tolerance or preference for other languages and the introduction of language choice in schools, legal institutions, electoral procedures or in business. On the other hand, no legal regulations, bodies or other means were introduced to determine and enforce any standards related to English language. One of the observers of language policy of the U.S. Government, or, to be more precise, an observer of the lack of such policy, described language environment in the United States in the following way:

(...) no polyglot empire of the world has dared be as ruthless in imposing a single language upon its whole population as was the liberal republic "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."¹⁵

The fact that the United States introduced no direct coercion to learn English does not mean total absence of such coercion. Newly arrived immigrants were intensively, albeit indirectly, encouraged to choose English and give up their vernacu-

¹⁴ B.S. Heath, op.cit., p. 8.

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp. 1–20.

lar language. Even if the state did not exert pressure on ethnic minorities to make them learn English, the resistant groups, by using only their home language, condemned themselves to economic isolation.¹⁶

The position of English among other languages and its variety used in the United States were determined by social and economic forces within the state. The dominant position of English was guaranteed without resorting to any legal, institutional or individual influences, alternately promoting or restricting the use of other languages, depending on current political trends. The access to broader social groups, other than one's own, depended to a large extent on the knowledge of English, while social advance required the use of standard American English. In conclusion, one may say that legal tolerance of other languages, common recognition of English language skills as well as the approval of standard American English as a determinant of social and economic advance are significant factors in the language heritage of the United States of America.

CURRENT LINGUISTIC ENVIRONMENT IN THE USA

Current linguistic environment in the United States as such affects languages worldwide including Great Britain, mainly in the result of the activity of Americans and American institutions outside the U.S.A. The global expansion of American English is inseparably related to the dominant position of the United States in all key aspects of modern life which include science, technology, culture, economy and politics. Such social and political factors as American effort in WWII, U.S. expansion in East Asia and recent developments in the Middle East have considerably contributed to establishing English as the unofficial second language almost in the whole world. Another significant factor is the conscious policy of the United States, promoting such status of American English. It is enough to mention the efforts of Fulbright Foundation, of the USIA and USAID, the Peace Corps, the Department of State and numerous aid programmes for developing countries and CEE countries, to realize how strong have American influences become in recent times. American industry and trade, post-war promotion of the United States to the position of a technological and scientific leader, and primarily its contribution to the development of international communications network, which became a fact in the modern world made English the language which is spoken at all times, in almost all corners of the world. American English has become one of the most commonly used *lingua franca* of our times, depriving the British variety of its privileged position.¹⁷ Another important transformation which occurred almost simultaneously was a change in the approach to English teaching methodology. The American state became institutionally involved in teaching English abroad. And in spite of the fact that some still consider typical American accent as peculiar, it should not be overlooked that this American variant

¹⁶ An interesting case of an ethnic and religious group who resisted the domination of English are Amish who arrived to America at the beginning of the 18th century from Alsatia, Germany and Switzerland. Consciously rejecting English, which was culturally alien to them, they decided to live separated from the external world, resigning from such basic civilisation facilities as electric power, telephone and car. They have hardly any knowledge of English as they use a German dialect called *Pennsylvania Dutch* as their everyday language.

¹⁷ B.S. Heath, op.cit., pp. 1–20.

is most commonly heard and copied abroad by English language learners. However, majority of the students do not particularly care whether their pronunciation is described as *American*. Generally, they just intend to master a universal, international variety of English – precisely the qualities which characterise American English.

The increase in the number of English users worldwide is impressive – from 50 million in 1600 to at least 280 million in 1950. If such dynamic growth continues, the number of *native speakers* may expectedly rise to one billion by 2350. Although such speculations are purely theoretical, one should realistically consider a considerable increase in the number of immigrants to the U.S.A., who will most probably join the group using English as their first language. The group of persons using English as their foreign language will also certainly increase, as English is among preferred foreign languages studied in the world.

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